

Introduction to Social Media, Activism, and Organizations

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Abstract

Social media have become increasingly pervasive. However, the literature on social movements and social media has not fully grasped just how much social media have fundamentally changed the landscape of organizational communication, ranging from stakeholders being able to directly mobilize resources to making grassroots transnational social movements more organizationally feasible. A major gap in the literature is this lack of understanding how social media have shaped social movement organizations (SMOs) and the organization of social movements. This Special Issue brings together a unique collection of articles that map and comment on the field of social media and social movements. The volume contributes to literature in this area by exploring how social media are not only shaping social movements, advocacy, and activism from the point of view of organizational communication but also changing the ways in which activists and SMOs interact with each other. The volume leverages a diverse array of interdisciplinary methods and covers a broad terrain ranging from analyses of knowledge transfer between grassroots activists via social media to large SMOs. The Issue is broadly divided into two parts. Part 1 is focused around trends and interventions in social media, activism, and organizations research. Part 2 revolves around a global collection of case studies. The two are hardly mutually exclusive and the boundaries are roughly drawn. This collection provides a critical starting point for better understanding social media and social movements, an area that is fundamentally important to a variety of disciplines but severely underresearched.

Keywords

social movements, social media, organizations

Social media (from mainstream platforms such as Facebook and Twitter to organization-specific tools) have become increasingly pervasive. This is exemplified by the diversity of uses ranging from Twitter and Facebook use during the Arab Spring (Murthy, 2013) to the use of Snapchat by highly surveilled activist groups (Valenzuela et al., 2014). Many social movements have increasingly seen social media as a means to collaboratively crowdsource with diverse stakeholders (Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012). In large organizations, social media are often supported because the technology can help foster the sense of a “digital village” (Berghel, 1995), where individuals are able to “see” the lives of others within their organization and feel closer to them (Brzozowski, Sandholm, & Hogg, 2009). Social media are, of course, used commercially as a key mode for product exposure and messaging (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). However, the literature on social movements and social media has not fully grasped just how much social media have fundamentally changed the landscape of organizational communication, ranging from stakeholders being able to directly mobilize resources to making grassroots transnational social movements more organizationally feasible. A major gap in the literature is this

lack of understanding how social media have shaped social movement organizations (SMOs) and the organization of social movements.

The purpose of this Special Issue is to discern and answer large metaquestions that are applicable to a variety of social movements contexts. Often, the social media literature has become trapped in disciplinary or domain-based silos that have inhibited the asking and answering of important interdisciplinary questions that ultimately have real consequences to social movements. Often, social media contributions to the social movements literature have revolved around specific empirical case studies such as Occupy (Juris, 2012), the Arab Spring (Eltantawy & Wiest, 2011), Dakota Access Pipeline protests (Michelle, 2017), and Black Lives Matter (Cox, 2017). This literature has also examined how social

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media have facilitated the rapid development of online movements which have sometimes moved offline (Harlow, 2012). Although these diverse empirical studies are fundamentally important to our knowledge of social media in social movements, broader organizational perspectives can help us understand how movements are increasingly interconnected online. In addition, social media have shaped and often fundamentally influenced the landscape of organizational communication within social movements. For example, Twitter has been found to be a dominant “organizing mechanism” which fundamentally shapes a social movement’s organizational structure rather than merely serving as a mode of communication (Segeberg & Bennett, 2011). Ultimately, social media often create rippling effects which touch many different aspects of the movements process from resource mobilization to actual interventions. They may also be making SMOs more democratic, breaking down traditional hierarchies between activists, other stakeholders, and movement leadership.

The use of social media in movement contexts is not only widely diverse but also oftentimes complex or contentious. In terms of the latter, for example, microblogging may be seen to be a weak form of activism (i.e., slacktivism) with Gladwell’s (2010) infamous argument that it is fairly ineffectual. However, recent social movements such as Black Lives Matter transitioned from tweet debates to action on the streets which profoundly shaped “national discourse about race” (Carney, 2016, p. 180). Activist organizations are increasingly seeing the value of social media for recruitment, public engagement, and campaign organization. Indeed, Manuel Castells’ (2013) book on social movements in the Internet age is largely focused on social media technologies. Social media can also effectively enable the sharing of data across traditional barriers such as geography. For example, Facebook helped fuel the Dakota Access Pipeline (NoDAPL) actions, with global social media users “checking in” as though they were at the physical protest to help activists on the ground avoid police surveillance based on Global Positioning System (GPS) tracking (Worland, 2016). Given work on social media has found that women are more likely to be active social media users (Correa, Hinsley, & De Zuniga, 2010), this may have major implications for movements which are organizationally gendered, ultimately enabling women to have more of a democratic involvement in some social movements.

Social movements can and do draw from accumulated knowledge gleaned from previous movements and activities. Historically, this is passed down from generation to generation and movement to movement. Social media have changed the ways in which this knowledge is being recorded and passed on. Given the success of Wikipedia, wikis not only have been seen as a successful means for “knowledge aggregation from many contributors” but also actually “results in the reconstruction of expertise” (Majchrzak, Wagner, & Yates, 2013). Social media, including but not limited to

wikis, can help make knowledge sharing much more transparent and accessible within large, distributed, global organizations. Third, social media have a role in helping develop and maintain a sense of community in large activist organizations and can be a motivator for participating in these platforms (Brzozowski et al., 2009). In studies of enterprise social media use, tweet-like microblogging was thought to lead to “more team cohesion and lead to faster problem solving” (Brzozowski et al., 2009). Twitter has been found to have linked geographically disparate groups during the Occupy movement (Croeser & Highfield, 2014). Although social media platforms can ultimately foster a powerful “sense of virtual community” (Majchrzak et al., 2013), a practical reality is that social media can be difficult to implement in terms of fostering a clear organizational structure, they are subject to governmental and other surveillance, and they often require vast amounts of resources to keep social media networks alive (e.g., tweets quickly fade into the ether unless new tweets keep hashtags and threads alive).

A less obvious issue is the lack of understanding of how social media affect the organization of activist networks. Specifically, social media are often thought to make activist movements more transparent. However, social media can and often do foster their own hierarchies and privilege certain voices (usually more central to the organizational network). Rather than being democratizing, social media—especially in the context of Twitter—have been seen by some as leading to elitism or information overload (Meraz, 2009). Social media may “empower” individuals to have a voice (Murthy, 2016), but this could also lead to high levels of noise, which inhibit “decision-making, innovation, and productivity” (Hemp, 2009), and this could have consequences in terms of the clarity of a movement’s message. Indeed, a powerful argument has emerged that social media are becoming increasingly integral to “organizational communication processes because they afford behaviors that were difficult or impossible [... were introduced and] may alter socialization, knowledge sharing, and power processes in organizations” (Treem & Leonardi, 2012). But without evaluating the use of social media in social movements from an organizational perspective, our ability to understand the changes they have influenced in organizational communication will be incomplete. Although it is urgent for us to better understand social media use in social movements, it is particularly pressing for those understandings to include organizational constructions, perspectives, and theories.

The Articles in This Issue

This Special Issue brings together a unique collection of articles that maps and comments on the field of social media and social movements. The volume contributes to literature in this area by exploring how social media are not only shaping social movements, advocacy, and activism from the point of

view of organizational communication but also changing the ways in which activists and SMOs interact with each other. The volume leverages a diverse array of interdisciplinary methods and covers a broad terrain ranging from analyses of knowledge transfer between grassroots activists via social media to large SMOs. The articles explore both “light” activism, such as reporting incidents, signing petitions, or lobbying one’s politicians and “heavier” activism, including online and offline campaigning. The issue is broadly divided into two parts. Part 1 is focused around trends and interventions in social media, activism, and organizations research. Part 2 revolves around a global collection of case studies. The two are hardly mutually exclusive and the boundaries are roughly drawn. However, this categorization is meant to provide an accessible means for exploring the diverse contributions of authors in this Issue.

Part 1: Trends and Interventions in Social Media, Activism, and Organizations Research

Karpp examines how new forms of analytics-based listening are incorporated into the strategic work of digitally mediated political organizations. He outlines both the potential and the limitations of this new form of membership input and also discusses some of the challenges that researchers can encounter when attempting to study social media and organizations through research methods that capture online speech while rendering online listening invisible. This contribution makes the far-reaching argument that digital listening leads researchers to capture phenomena that have previously been ignored in the social media and collective action literature. Schradie argues against the common view that contemporary large-scale protest movements integrate and rely on social media to mobilize. Using the Moral Monday movement in North Carolina as a case study, she demonstrates that what drove this movement was a network of structured organizations, grassroots organizing, and traditional media in this response to an economic and political crisis. Key to Schradie’s intervention is that the latest digital wave may fall short in explaining movement origins. Elliott and Earl investigate how often and in what ways traditional SMOs try to connect with potential youth activists online. They find that neither SMO-run nor non-SMO run online spaces do much to try to involve youth or target youth for recruitment. However, their survey data show that youth are quite active and that organizational involvement increases the likelihood of involvement. Their study makes the cardinal argument that making connections to SMOs is consequential for youth participation.

Housley et al. illustrate the continued importance of conducting granular level, interaction-focused analysis of social media posts in the context of activism. Using case studies of Twitter-based campaigns, they demonstrate how this novel approach can further understandings of user exchanges and the micro-transformational characteristics within organizational communication. This in turn can inform further work

conceptualizing the broader impact of activist campaigns and the treatment of social media as “data” more generally. Dawson develops a typology of the communities surrounding organizations’ social media presence and their impact on organizational identity construction. She uniquely explores the influence of varied social media interactions on organizational practice. Through extensive qualitative research including interviews with social media writers and marketing meeting observations, Dawson insightfully demonstrates ways that organizational identity is co-authored in communication through confirming and disconfirming identity messages.

Part 2: Global Case Studies in Social Media, Activism, and Organizations Research

Tsatsou draws data from a largely under-explored case of civic activism, that of the Sunflower Movement in Taiwan. She challenges the widely argued idea that, in digitally mediated activism, civic activists and their networks self-organize without central or “lead” organizational actors. Tsatsou, on the contrary, argues that there are multiple actors and levels of leadership in online and social media-enabled communication that demonstrate how leadership can involve a range of actors and action levels, both online and offline. Donovan illustrates how The Occupy movement developed communication infrastructure to fit to changing social and political conditions. Using the case study of InterOccupy, an organization that tasked itself with forging lines of communication between protesters from the time of the encampments through the Occupy Sandy recovery effort, Donovan exposes the complexity of different modes of participation in this networked social movement. Importantly, she provides an account of the limits of social media to coordinate participation after the initial call to action.

Kampf explores identity and problem-solving as focal points for an emerging form of positive activism toward business. Using the cases of Carrotmob and the Good Guide, she contrasts these focal points with an ideology and legitimacy focus traditional to dialectic interactions between activists and business. Kampf’s framing of activism that connects Corporate Social Responsibility with Consumer Social Responsibility contributes to the notion of social media “native” activism based in identity and problem-solving as a construct that can inform further work theorizing post-dialectic approaches to activism.

Cossu examines how the organizational model of artistic social movements can be successfully explored by adopting a mixed methods approach that grounds the analysis of digital affordances in thick ethnographic description to overcome the binary opposition of centralism and spontaneity. He argues that an inversion of the traditional equation of organizational forms is taking place within this new wave of art activism. Using the case study of Macau “The New Centre for Arts, Culture and Research of Milan,” Cossu reveals how the “event” acts as an organizational device for

which events are not produced in order to persist as an organization with its structures and roles but how series of events become the organization of action and communication.

Ultimately, this collection provides a critical starting point for better understanding social media and social movements, an area that is fundamentally important to a variety of disciplines but severely underresearched.

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